

## **Macedonian Immigrants in Illinois**

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In 1972, Rushan and Razija Mehmedi immigrated to the United States from Macedonia. The conditions in their homeland were unsuitable for living, and when they came here they found jobs and security. Their family soon joined them in finding a new life full of opportunities. They also brought their native culture. Adapting was hard at first, but they grew to love the country that fulfilled their hopeful dreams. They decided to immigrate when some relatives informed them of the opportunities that awaited them in America.

Rushan and Razija came to America from Macedonia in 1972. Their original plan was to make five thousand dollars and then return to their homeland. They first lived in Chicago, and both found work shortly after their arrival. Rushan was a cook in a restaurant, while Razija worked in a hotel. After a year-and-a-half they had made enough money, but decided that they wanted to make the United States their permanent home. They bought a car and moved to Dixon, Illinois. Here they opened up a steak house, but then sold it to another Macedonian family. They then traveled to Oregon, Illinois, where they stayed. Rushan opened up a small restaurant, the "Sunrise Family Restaurant," in the nearby city of Byron. Although life in America was going well for the young couple, conditions in their homeland got worse.

Although the conditions were not life-threatening, unemployment was at an all-time high. The country was under communist rule. After hearing of the wonderful opportunities in America, Razija's brother, Kako, sister Chama, brother-in-law, Sevdo, and her mother decided to follow in their footsteps. In 1983 they landed in America. Kako became interested in the

restaurant business as well and opened up a “Sunrise Family Restaurant” in Oregon. Likewise, Sevdo opened one in Rochelle. In 1995 Razija's nephew, Elvis, came to America because the Macedonian medical system was poor and he had a heart problem. His mother, although still living in Macedonia, decided that Elvis would live a better life if he stayed with his aunt in America, and he started working for his uncle right away. They all had jobs, security, and most importantly, they were happy. As the years passed, their businesses prospered, and the quality of their lives continued to improve.

The group, with the exception of Rushan, now lives in Silver Ridge Subdivision just outside of Oregon. Rushan has moved to Clinton, Iowa, and owns the Clinton Family Restaurant. Razija recently bought her own restaurant, Scoops, in Oregon. The restaurants owned by the immigrant group have good business. When Razija was asked if there were any negatives to moving to America she said, "All of it was positive, there were no real negatives."

The group brought their culture with them. They celebrate the Islamic holidays, such as Ramadan, Eid El Fitr, and the Islamic New Year. Ramadan begins on November 6. During this time they are not to eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. December 5 is the Eid El Fitr, which marks the end of the fasting. During this time they visit the mosque in Rockford, Illinois, and then return home to have a great feast. On March 4, they celebrate their Islamic New Year. Because of their ability to bring their native culture with them, they can have the best of both worlds.

However, while America did have the great opportunity of good education, school in the new world was not so easy for Elvis. He knew little English, and he said, "Teachers would assign me homework, but I would have no idea what they were saying. So, I didn't do it." Making friends was also difficult for him. Elvis took the course English as a Second Language and he caught on quickly. Soon, he adapted and made friends, along with the rest of his family.

The Macedonian group is now an important part of the community of Oregon. Its members are all very brave people for taking a chance and coming to a world they knew little about. The conditions in Macedonia were rough, and they knew something had to be done. They all agree now that it was the right decision. Although they will always miss their homeland, they have their culture, family, and most importantly, they have their freedom to cherish.

[From student historian's interview with Elvis Beneski, Sept. 16, 2002; student historian's interview with Razija Mehmedi, Sept. 19, 2002; New Jersey Department of Education, "List of Religious Holidays Calendar for 2002-03," <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/genfo/holidays.htm>]. (Sept. 22, 2002; Oct. 11, 2002).